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SIPDIS  
TELEGRAM

July 28, 2003

To: No Action Addressee  
Action: Unknown  
From: AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI (ABU DHABI 3509 - PRIORITY)  
TAGS: PHUM  
Captions: None  
Subject: UAE 2003 RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT  
Ref: None

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UNCLAS ABU DHABI 03509

SIPDIS  
CXABU:  
ACTION: POL  
INFO: ECON DCM P/M RSO AMB

DISSEMINATION: POL  
CHARGE: PROG

APPROVED: AMB: MWAHBA  
DRAFTED: POL: MMENARD  
CLEARED: A/DCM: KVANDEVATE; CGD: JDAVIS; ECON: OJOHN

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PP RUEHC RUEHDI  
DE RUEHAD #3509/01 2091524  
ZNR UUUUU ZZH  
P 281524Z JUL 03  
FM AMEMBASSY ABU DHABI  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 1054  
INFO RUEHDI/AMCONSUL DUBAI 3304

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 06 ABU DHABI 003509

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR DRL/CRA, DRL/IRF, DRL/PHD, NEA, NEA/ARP AND NEA/RA

E.O. 12958: DECL: N/A  
TAGS: [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [TC](#)  
SUBJECT: UAE 2003 RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

REF: STATE 197330

[1](#)1. Sensitive but Unclassified -- entire text.

[1](#)2. Following is post's submission for the 2003 Religious Freedom Report (1 July 2002 - 30 June 2003) for the United Arab Emirates. Per reftel, our update is keyed to the 2002 final report. A copy of the 2002 Report with tracked changes will also be sent via classified email to DRL/CRA, DRL/IRF, DRL/PHD, NEA/ARP, and NEA/RA.

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PREFACE  
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[1](#)3. In paragraph 1, sentence 2, please replace "freedom of

assembly and association" with "public freedom of assembly and association" and replace "greatly limiting the ability" with "limiting somewhat the ability".

¶4. In paragraph 1, please replace the last sentence with the following:

"The Government permits de facto recognition of religious groups through the issuance of land use permits to build and operate religious buildings. Many religious groups that operate religious buildings permit religious groups without dedicated religious buildings to worship in their facilities. Religious groups without dedicated religious buildings also worship in private homes, generally without government interference."

¶5. In paragraph 2, sentence 1, please replace "improved somewhat" with "continued to improve".

¶6. In paragraph 2, please replace sentence 2 with the following: "Two new churches opened with a capacity of at least 1,000 people. The fifth Indian Orthodox Church in the UAE also opened, and permission was granted to build another Coptic Orthodox church."

¶7. In paragraph 3, please change "among religions in society" to "among religions, nationalities and races in society".

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SECTION I. RELIGIOUS DEMOGRAPHY  
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¶8. In paragraph 1, sentence 1, please replace "3.1 million" with "3.7 million."

¶9. In paragraph 1, sentence 4, please replace "professionals" with "expatriates."

¶10. In paragraph 2, please add the following as the first sentence:

"There are foreign missionaries operating in the UAE."

¶11. In paragraph 2, new sentence 2, please delete "nontraditional".

¶12. In paragraph 2, last sentence, please replace "religious groups here" with "religious groups".

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SECTION II. STATUS OF RELIGIOUS FREEDOM  
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-- LEGAL/POLICY FRAMEWORK

¶13. In paragraph 1, sentence 2, please replace "freedom of assembly" with "public freedom of assembly" and replace "greatly limiting the ability" with "limiting somewhat the ability".

¶14. In paragraph 1, please add the following to the end of the paragraph:

"Many religious groups that operate religious buildings permit religious groups without dedicated religious buildings to worship in their facilities. Religious groups without dedicated religious buildings also worship in private homes, generally without government interference."

¶15. Please delete paragraph 2. The first sentence is moved to the end of paragraph 5. The remaining content is included in the following two paragraphs.

¶16. In former paragraph 3, please replace "Virtually all Sunni mosques are government funded or subsidized" with "The Government funds or subsidizes virtually all Sunni mosques".

¶17. In former paragraph 3, please add the following to the end of the paragraph: "All Sunni imams are government-employed. The Government distributes guidance on religious sermons to mosques and imams, whether Sunni or Shi'a, and monitors all sermons for political content."

¶18. In former paragraph 4, please add the following as new sentence 3: "Shi'a imams are government-appointed only in Dubai Emirate."

¶19. In former paragraph 5, please add the following to the end of the paragraph (from former paragraph 2): "The Government does, however, permit de facto recognition of other religions through the issuance of land use permits for the construction and operation of religious buildings."

¶20. Please add the following between former paragraphs 5 and 6 (Language is taken from "Restrictions" section and placed in "Legal/Policy Framework" because the following language describes policy. Language that explains how the policy can be restrictive is contained in the "Restrictions" section.):

"Non-Muslim groups are permitted to practice their religion freely in religious compounds built on land grants from the local rulers. In such cases, a religious group leader requests from the local ruler a grant of land (title to which remains with the ruler) and permission to build a religious building thereon. Religious groups without land grants and religious buildings built thereon are thereby limited in their ability to assemble for worship and to conduct business, but are allowed to worship on the compounds of other religious groups if permitted by such religious groups to do so. Discreet, off-compound private and public gatherings are not targeted or disrupted by the police or other security forces."

"There are approximately 23 Christian church buildings in the UAE built on land donated by the ruling families of the emirates in which they are located. One Hindu temple and two Sikh temples also operate in the UAE. Three emirates are home to parochial primary and secondary schools. Abu Dhabi and Dubai Emirates have donated land for Christian cemeteries, and Abu Dhabi has donated land for a Bah'ai cemetery. There are two operating cremation facilities and associated cemeteries for the Hindu community, one in Dubai and one in Sharjah."

"Non-Muslim religious groups do not receive funds from the Government. However, those with land grants are not charged rental payments and some of the religious buildings constructed on land grants were donated by the local ruling families. Also, Sharjah Emirate waives payment of utilities for religious buildings. Non-Muslim groups raise money from among their congregants and receive financial support from abroad. Religious groups also advertise certain religious functions in the press, such as memorial services, choral concerts, and fundraising events."

¶21. Please delete former paragraph 6 and insert as the next paragraph after former paragraph 7 beginning "As the state religion...."

¶22. In the former second to last paragraph, last sentence, please replace "forbidden publicly to eat, drink, or smoke during fasting hours" with "forbidden to eat, drink, or smoke publicly during fasting hours."

¶23. Please add the following as the new second to last paragraph:

"The rulers of the various emirates regularly pardoned prisoners on religious and national holidays without regard to the prisoners' religious affiliations. Those pardoned generally are serving sentences from 3 to 5 years for financial crimes, immigration violations, and other minor offenses; pardons reportedly were not extended to prisoners convicted of murder, rape, and kidnapping. Most of the pardoned foreign nationals were deported, while those

jailed for financial crimes were given a grace period to settle amounts still owed prior to deportation."

#### -- RESTRICTIONS ON RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

¶24. In paragraph 1, sentence 2, please delete "either" and replace "ministries" with "departments."

¶25. In paragraph 1, sentence 3, please replace "controls in all mosques the appointment of preachers and the conduct of their work" with "controls the appointment of preachers and the conduct of their work in all mosques".

¶26. Please add the following as new paragraph 2:

"The UAE Government espouses and supports in practice a moderate interpretation of Islam. In concert with other governments, in 2001 the Government arrested and detained numerous individuals suspected of ties to extremist groups. Most of them were subsequently released."

¶27. In former paragraph 2, sentence 1, please replace "There does not appear to be a formalized method" with "There is no formalized method".

¶28. In former paragraph 2, sentence 2, please replace "access to land to and permission to build a church thereon" with "access to land to religious groups with permission to build religious buildings thereon."

¶29. In former paragraph 2, sentence 3, please replace "churches" with "religious buildings" and please replace "Christian congregations" with "religious groups".

¶30. Please delete former paragraphs 3 and 4. Reason: Moved to "Legal/Policy Framework" section.

¶31. In former paragraph 5, sentence 1, please replace "Ras Al-Khaymah" with "Ras Al-Khaimah".

¶32. In former paragraph 5, please delete sentences 2-4. Reason: Sentences moved to "Positive Developments" section to join other information on new religious buildings.

¶33. In former paragraph 6, please delete sentence 1. Reason: Moved to "Legal/Policy Framework" section.

¶34. In former paragraph 6, please replace former sentences 2 and 3 with the following:

"There is only one Hindu temple for the large Hindu community. There are also only two Sikh temples. All three temples are located in Dubai."

¶35. Please delete former paragraph 7. Reason: Moved to "Legal/Policy Framework" section.

¶36. Please replace former paragraph 8 with the following:

"The conversion of Muslims to other religions is regarded with extreme antipathy; therefore, the Government prohibits non-Muslims from proselytizing or distributing religious literature under penalty of criminal prosecution and imprisonment for engaging in behavior offensive to Islam. While there is no law against missionary activities per se, the authorities reportedly have threatened to revoke the residence permits of persons suspected of public missionary activities."

Reason: Remaining information placed in other following paragraphs to improve the flow of this section.

¶37. Please add the following paragraphs after former paragraph 8 beginning with "The conversion of Muslims to other religions":

"In November 2002, two members of the Dubai Police Criminal Investigation Department (CID) arrested an evangelical

Christian pastor for distributing religious materials at a public shopping mall in violation of the prohibition against proselytizing. The CID had received a complaint from a Muslim expatriate that the pastor had distributed religious literature to him at that same location the day before. The pastor was detained for almost one month before being released on bail; he provided his passport to the authorities as security for his release. His movements in the country were not restricted, and he reportedly preached to various church congregations throughout the country during his release. The court gave the religious materials to a local panel of Islamic scholars for review to determine if they were offensive to Islam -- the panel concluded that the religious materials were not inherently offensive to Islam, but would be offensive to a Muslim if given to a Muslim. The court convicted the defendant on 27 April, sentenced him to one year, suspended the sentence, and ordered his deportation. Although, prior to his arrest, the pastor had planned to leave the UAE in January 2003, he appealed the deportation order and requested a grace period to allow his children time to complete the school year. The court granted the requested grace period."

"In March 2001, Dubai police arrested four visiting noncitizens for violating laws barring non-Muslims from proselytizing because they distributed Christian religious materials, including videos and CD-ROMs, on a public street. One of those arrested was detained for less than a week. Authorities held the passports of those arrested during the investigation; the accused persons deposited their passports as security to guarantee their appearance in court. They were able to move freely about Dubai but not permitted to leave the emirate. The charges against the noncitizens were dropped on April 8, 2001, and they left the country on April 9."

¶38. In former paragraph 9, sentence 1, please replace "foreigners to declare" with "foreigners applying for residence permits to declare".

¶39. In former paragraph 9, sentence 1, please replace "the Government does not collect" with "the Government reportedly does not collect".

¶40. Please add the following new paragraph after former paragraph 9 beginning with "Immigration authorities routinely....":

"In addition customs authorities have questioned the entry of large quantities of religious materials (such as Bibles and hymnals) that they deemed in excess of the normal requirements of existing congregations, although in most instances the items have been permitted entry. Customs authorities reportedly are less likely to question the importation of Christian religious items than non-Muslim, non-Christian religious items, although in virtually all instances importation of the material in question eventually has been permitted."

Reason: Moved to this location from location earlier in the Section.

¶41. Please replace former paragraph 10 with the following (Reason: Rewording and additional language.):

"There is a dual system of Shari'a (Islamic) courts for criminal and family law matters and secular courts for civil law matters. Non-Muslims are tried for criminal offenses in Shari'a courts. Not all crimes are punishable by Shari'a penalties. In cases punishable by Shari'a penalty, non-Muslims may receive civil penalties at the discretion of the judge, which generally occurs. Shari'a penalties imposed on non-Muslims also may be overturned or modified by a higher court."

¶42. In former paragraph 11, please add the following as new sentence 2: "Dubai has a special Shi'a council to act on matters pertaining to Shi'a family law."

¶43. In former paragraph 11, former sentence 2, please replace "marry non-Muslim women;" with "marry non-Muslim women "of the book," that is Christian or Jewish women;".

¶44. In former paragraph 12, sentence 2, please replace "schools" with "public schools".

¶45. In former paragraph 12, please delete the last sentence.

¶46. In former paragraph 12, please add the following sentences as new sentences 3 and 4:

"Religious groups may, however, conduct religious instruction for their members on their religious compounds, and there are parochial schools operating in the country. According to Article 84 of the Executive System of Private Education, private schools found teaching subjects that contravene Islam, defame any religion or contravene the nation's ethics and beliefs may face penalties, including closure."

#### -- IMPROVEMENTS AND POSITIVE DEVELOPMENTS IN RESPECT FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

¶47. In paragraph 1, please replace sentence 1 with the following:

"In mid-2003, the Coptic Orthodox Church received permission to build a church in Abu Dhabi. Two new churches also opened during the period covered by this report -- in April 2003, a 1,000-plus capacity Coptic Orthodox church and service facilities opened in Dubai, and in October 2002, a 1,000-plus capacity Catholic Church and hall opened in Fujairah emirate."

¶48. In paragraph 1, please add the following sentences between former sentences 3 and 4: "The Indian Orthodox church opened in May 2003 in a public ceremony. In early 2001, ground was broken in Jebel Ali for the construction of several churches on a parcel of land donated by the Government of Dubai to four Protestant congregations and a Catholic congregation."

¶49. In paragraph 1, former sentence 4, please replace "A Catholic church" with "The Catholic church".

¶50. In paragraph 1, please add the following as the new second to last sentence: "In May 2001, the Crown Prince of Dubai authorized the construction of a Greek Orthodox church on donated land."

¶51. In paragraph 1, last sentence, please replace "Also during the period covered by the report," with "Also in 2001,".

¶52. Please add the following paragraphs as new paragraphs 2-5:

"In April 2002, UAE President Shaykh Zayed bin Sultan Al Nahyan announced that he would personally fund, through the UAE Red Crescent Authority, the repair and restoration of Bethlehem's Church of the Nativity and Omar mosque, both of which were damaged during Israeli-Palestinian hostilities."

"In June 2002, a Palestinian Greek Orthodox priest paid an official visit to the UAE. In February 2003, UAE Supreme Council member and Ruler of Ajman Emirate received an official visit from the Catholic Bishop to the Arabian Peninsula. Also in February 2003, the Coptic Archbishop of Jerusalem and the Near East delivered a lecture on religious tolerance at the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-Up in Abu Dhabi. In May, the Bishop of the Delhi Dioceses was the chief celebrant at the public consecration ceremony of the fifth Indian Orthodox church in the UAE. In July, the Zayed Center for Coordination and Follow-Up hosted the Catholic Bishop to the Arabian Peninsula, who spoke on religious tolerance in the UAE and the importance of dialogue among religions."

"In May 2002, the Council of Evangelical Churches hosted a 3-day public conference in Abu Dhabi, which featured an internationally renowned Christian speaker, seminars, and workshops, with events for adults and children. Tickets to the conference were available upon request."

"Also in 2002, the Dubai Evangelical Church Center hosted a youth event called "Desert Challenge" attended by adults and children from six countries."

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SECTION III -- SOCIETAL ATTITUDES  
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¶53. In the second to last sentence, please replace "they are able to best limit unwanted foreign influence" with "they can best balance foreign influence."

¶54. Please delete the last sentence.

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SECTION IV -- U.S. GOVERNMENT POLICY  
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¶55. Please replace paragraph 2 with the following:

"Embassy officials in Abu Dhabi and Consulate General officials in Dubai have discussed religious tolerance and freedom with UAE Government officials on a number of occasions, and have encouraged the government to increase religious freedom here by permitting the opening or expansion of religious facilities for the large expatriate population. Embassy and consulate officials also help to protect religious freedom by monitoring its status through informal inquiries and meetings with UAE Government officials and representatives of Muslim, Christian and other faiths. For example, Embassy and Consulate officials closely monitored the criminal proceedings in 2002-2003 of the evangelical Christian pastor arrested for proselytizing, and the Consul General urged Dubai officials to dispose of the case in a manner acceptable to all parties involved."

WAHBA